The Furness Letters

A Review by JOHN ERSKINE.

THE LETTERS OF HORACE HOWARD FURNESS. Edited by Horace Furness Jayne. Houghton Mifflin Company.

THESE letters of the great Shakespearean scholar, edited by his grandson, might be expected to yield chiefly a literary feast, the record of a bookman's relations with others of the same taste. As a matter of fact, they record with unconscious brilliancy the moral rather than the literary aspects of a noble career, and they leave the reader convinced that here is one more first rate witness to the quality of American character in the second third of the nineteenth century. Furness had qualities of greatness as a man, and the letters would have been as fascinating—indeed, they would have been practically unchanged—had he never had anything to do with Shakespeare, and the kind of greatness he had, intelligence, integrity, loyalty, common sense, humor, he had from his abolitionist father, along with his tacit assumption that all life, even his own life, was to be lived for some lofty purpose. To the end of his days, in 1912, he preserved the same power and balance of character which shows in his letters from college, and it was his final grace of mind that, though bringing down to us so large an illustration of manhood in America's heroic age, he has no critical or inhospitable attitude toward our later world.

When he was 19 he wrote from Harvard an account of Daniel Webster's funeral, which he had attended with a classmate. If we doubt that his abilities dated from the heroic age we have only to ask how many undergraduates could give so lively and straightforward an account of anything. "Each little road, from some neighboring village or town, mustered its crowd as we pass, and even at the distance of three or four miles the scene partook of solemnity. There was no gayety or unseemly mirth. Every one was silent and seemed in earnest.

"When I reached Marshfield I found that Webster's body was laid out under a tree, and that a queue of considerable length had formed; the men walked two by two up to the coffin, then separated, one on each side of it, after passing it again joined and then marched through his house. When I got there, as I said, the queue was quite long, and as waiting was not very consistent with my mood I coolly went and stood alongside one of the men a few feet from the coffin; the man could not say a word, for I interfered with no one. Whether Mr. Webster looked natural or not I cannot say, never having seen him when alive, but he certainly looked very haggard, careworn and black. He was dressed, I believe, in his usual style, for the whole lid of the coffin being off the entire man could be seen. There were flowers in profusion in his coffin, and I stopped and plucked an ivy leaf from a wreath of the same placed near his head. . . . Instead of joining my companions and going through the house I simply stepped aside and took my station near one of the undertakers, from whence I could look to my heart's content, and endeavored to impress Mr. Webster's features on my mind. Every one was silent or else spoke in whispers. But not always—one man (a brute) came up eating an apple, and just before he came to the coffin took an extraordinarily large bite, so that his eating might not be interrupted."

A year later he wrote to his family an admirable account of the inauguration of Dr. Walker, who succeeded Jared Sparks as president of the college, and several pictures of Agassiz in his gracious contacts with the undergraduates, one of whom brought him a queer geological specimen which turned out to be a clinker of burned coal. In May, 1854, he went with three other students to dine at Concord with R. W. Emerson, a close friend of his father. Emerson had written the boys to come out on the 12 o'clock train, but, after the train had started, they discovered that it did not stop at Concord. They had to walk back from Lexington, and arrived at Concord an hour and a quarter late for dinner. But Emerson had by this time discovered his mistake in the time table, and was keeping the meal for them with equanimity. At 6:30 the boys left to catch the train which Emerson said left in fifteen minutes. At the station they learned that the philosopher was wrong again; the train did not leave till 10 o'clock.

On graduation, Furness made an extended tour in Europe and Asia Minor with a college friend, and there acquired the fluent command of modern languages which was to serve him later in his work on the Variorum. The letters written to his family during this time are perhaps the most interesting in the collection, partly because of the material he had to report and partly because at this period in his life he had the leisure to elaborate his news into messages of very real literary charm. The account of the journey from France over the Pyrenees into Spain by diligence (the only available mode of travel) is unusually fine; so is the letter telling of his visit to Jerusalem.

On his return, he was admitted to the bar, and, quite incidentally, joined the Shakespeare Society of Philadelphia. But the outbreak of the Civil War postponed all ordinary interests, and, having been rejected for military service because of deafness, he joined the Sanitary Commission, and did excellent work in the hospitals and in arousing public interest in hospital needs. This episode of his life was too crowded to permit much letter writing, but the examples we have give us a sharp glimpse into the seriousness of the long struggle. Several letters to an English friend are, by exception, very elaborate, intended, evidently, to put before British attention the Northern point of view. They are written with more fire and eloquence, perhaps, than Furness usually shows, for only an extraordinary occasion could lift him altogether above the mood of pleasant humor which is one of the charms even of his scholarly writing.

At the close of the war he set himself to the great task of making a satisfactory variorum edition of Shakespeare. One admires the editor's judgment in giving us in full the correspondence between Furness and W. Aldis Wright on the appearance of the prospectus of the work; for this famous argument, which led to a lifetime friendship between the two scholars, illustrates the naïve side of American culture—the side that disturbs the foreigner now as then. The publisher advertised that the text of the variorum would be that of the Cambridge edition, without having communicated in any way, apparently, with the Cambridge editor. In the exchange of remarks that followed the situation cleared quickly and happily, since the American scholar had no intention of infringing on his English colleague's right; the incident, with its misunderstandings, brings out the human quality of both men, much to their credit.

The remaining letters, with the exception of one group of them, record the rich friendships, the increasing honors and the incidental sorrows of a long and busy life. They are not great letters in the sense that the letters of William James are great; they have not the precocity which distinguished Furness's own letters from college, nor the unusual subject matter which inspired his letters of travel, but they disclose an admirable personality, which is almost enough to ask of any writing, and they have always grace of phrasing, good humor, good sense and wit.

The group of letters which form a break in the record of his literary interests are those dealing with his work on the Seybert Commission—a commission under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania to investigate the truth of modern spiritism. Furness was active chairman of the commission and wrote the report of its labors. Beginning with some faith in spiritism, he came out of the investigation with no faith in it at all—at least none in the mediums he and his colleagues were able to study. His descriptions of the various kinds of fraud he met with are delightful reading, though their humor may distress the present devotees of spiritism, as his report shocked the spiritists of an earlier day.

On the side of his life for which he is famous, his Shakespearean scholarship, the letters illustrate again what we already know from the variorum itself, that he was one of the sanest of editors, properly skeptical of unimaginative textual criticism, ready to leave a problem unsolved rather than to obscure it by a mere guess, always humane in his love of the poets. His common sense leaves its flavor after his book of letters is closed. Scholarship and society have not his like to-day.

Science Up in the Air

ICE AGES. By Joseph McCabe. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
THE NEW AIR WORLD. By Willis Luther Moore. Little, Brown & Co.
THE BOOK OF THE SKY. By M. Luckiesh. E. P. Dutton & Co.
GRAVITATION VERSUS RELATIVITY. By Charles Lane Poor. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
PRACTICAL ADVANCED NAVIGATION. By Charles H. Coyle. E. P. Dutton & Co.

SCIENCE is changing man's perspective, as a recent group of books shows, to a marked degree. The phenomenon can be looked at from two angles. We are learning many facts which would have been unthought of a century ago, so that we could say that the universe is growing smaller. On the other hand, we may hold that on account of the vast new fields we have to conquer the cosmos is continually widening.

Joseph McCabe has been uniformly successful in his attempts to popularize science. He links every subject with which he deals to the topic of evolution. In his book on "Ice Ages" he answers the natural query of the man in the street as to how we know so much about our planet's past. He has an answer to all those who are skeptical about the teachings of science. He says: "We say that the earth weighs 6,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 tons; that very few of the stars are less than 100,000,000,000 miles away, that a 'certain new star' was a blaze of white-hot hydrogen gas several billion miles away, flaming outward at a speed of a thousand miles a second. The thoughtless person rolls his eyes as if he knew more about the rules of evidence than our best men of science do. Yet in all these cases the evidence is simple and conclusive. It is far easier to prove these things than to prove that there are any stars or even that there is an earth. Mr. McCabe is at his best in explaining the evidence for the ice ages. In his other chapters his glaciers of thought have picked up too much debris. He explains how the ice age stimulated the evolution of higher forms and was responsible for human progress.

In his book, "The New Air World," Willis Luther Moore has a chapter on "Civilization Follows the Storm Tracks." Like Joseph McCabe he is a believer in progress through hardship. Mr. Moore feels a professional interest in storms because for eighteen years he has been chief of the United States Weather Bureau. He asks us, "How much do you know of the great aerial ocean on the bottom of which you live and in which human beings are just beginning to fly? Its variations of heat, cold, sunshine, cloud and tempest materially affect not only the health and happiness of man but his commercial and industrial welfare, and yet few know more than a little of the wonders of the life giving medium that so intimately concerns them." Mr. Moore gives several anecdotes of criminal cases in which his records saved innocent men. He describes the work of the Weather Bureau and tells how to take observations. He says: "In the future the meteorologist and the aviator will be closely allied." We do not realize the importance of humidity in regulating temperature, and the author suggests that "water instead of coal should be used to make rooms comfortable when the temperature has reached 68 degrees." No Washington bureaucrat since Samuel P. Langley has written in such a fine style, and it is a pity that Mr. Moore does not give proper credit to such American pioneers in meteorology as Henry Helm Clayton, now head of the Argentine Government's work, and Prof. Frank W. Very of the Westwood Astrophysical Society.

Mr. Moore has given us the practical side of our new knowledge, but Mr. Luckiesh stresses its elements of romance in "The Book of the Sky." Mr. Luckiesh is director of applied science at the Nela Research Laboratories. His work has fre-

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